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Magazines and the Making of America: Modernization, Community and Print Culture, 1741-1860

Heather Haveman (2015)

1st ed. , Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 432 pp.,

ISBN : 9780691164403, h/bk, £30.95

Reviewed by David Finkelstein, University of Edinburgh

This is an ambitious work that seeks to place nineteenth-century American magazine culture within larger social contexts. Underpinning it is a significant datamining exercise, utilising online sources such as the America Periodical Series Online digitization of nineteenth-century journals to explore the whos, whens, wheres and hows of the publishing and circulation of periodicals during the early period of the American republic.

The volume, which emerges from work funded by the National Science Foundation and other grant sources, concentrates on three major themes: contextualizing the social, cultural and business infrastructures that underpinned the development of magazines in the U.S. republic during its formative years; analyzing the rise of the religious and denominational periodical as a dominant communication form in U.S. social spheres over the same period, and exploring the parallel rise of agricultural and social reform magazines as key vehicles for shaping communal identities over space and time. Other subjects explored include the role of the postal system and railway networks in facilitating the circulation and distribution of journals over the course of the nineteenth century, and the significance of technological innovation in lowering costs and improving facilities for producing periodicals in translocal settings.

There is an exhaustive welter of statistics for the data lover in this volume. Some of it quite significant in clarifying and confirming trends that others have speculated on in less quantitative fashion. Thus noteworthy is Haveman's analysis of the rise in U.S. denominational periodical publishing over the 120 years discussed, with particular attention paid to the way in which such developments and diversity in publications were tied into key historical periods of religious revivalism. As Haveman points out, between 1740 and 1860 rates of religious participation rose exponentially, with numbers of congregations, for example, increasing from 1350 to over 54,000. The same period witnessed a massive influx of immigrants, bringing in their wake religious diversity and denominational differences. Such diversity was reflected in the expansion of journals founded to meet individual group demands: while only twenty denominational journals were founded between 1784-1800, 768 religious periodicals were established in the period 1826-1850, and more startlingly, 305 alone were developed in the decade before the Civil War (1850-1860). Haveman charts such diversity well, noting that the effect was to create a sense of collective identity, to defend principles from attack, to educate and to proselytize.

Similar attention is paid to the expansion of social reform journals catering to significant subgroups and reform agendas, ranging from the anti-slavery, temperance and workers' movements, to reformation of prostitutes, seamen and penal systems. Haveman charts the symbiotic link between social reform movements and journal activity over the relevant time period: committed reform associations founded journals to communicate their intentions and activities; as constituent members grew, so too did the circulation base of journals linked to relevant associations; creative content generated by constituent participants and their representatives shaped new directions for such journals, encouraging the presentation of a miscellany of material (poetry, prose, fiction, non-fiction) that addressed the core issues favoured by relevant readers; and such new material was enfolded in visual and textual forms designed to attract new audiences. Such approaches, Haveman argues, helped frame and thus theorize movements,

making sense of core principles and goals, and creating cultural frames that bound together similarly minded activist communities across space and time.

Curious gaps, however, exist in the discussion and sources drawn on in this densely researched volume. Haveman spends a great deal of time exploring the role of postal networks in hugely increasing circulation of periodicals to national readers over the early nineteenth century. Circulation is unproblematically assumed to have been via subscriptions to individual readers or organisations. One could have probed this a bit further for a more nuanced discussion of readership and reception. Subscriptions to national periodicals could take the form of individual subscriptions, communal subscriptions, or subscriptions via public organizations and community spaces. As other studies not cited by Haveman have suggested, public spaces such as libraries, reading rooms, and community clubs, and commercial vendors such as railway bookstalls, stationers, and booksellers, were vital circulation points for magazines and periodicals, particularly from the 1840s onwards. While many of these outlets depended on postal and railway services to ensure receipt of transnational material, alternative means of distribution were equally prevalent. The Protestant American Tract Society, for example, disseminated its periodical material through the American Sunday School Union using travelling representatives: in 1832 it boasted a network of almost 80 itinerant missionaries whose main role was to distribute religious magazines and reading material across its national network of Sunday Schools. Similarly, networks of commercial organisations created reading rooms and subscription libraries to receive and distribute specialized or focused material for relevant subscribers. Business oriented services such as the New York Mercantile Library (founded in 1820), often purchased multiple subscriptions of key US and UK trade journals so as to ensure multiple access to the latest transatlantic and translocal commercial news and information.

Similarly, much space is devoted to an in-depth comparison of the types of individuals who established magazines between 1740-1800 and 1841-1860. Haveman uses sampling data to establish socio-cultural and economic

backgrounds and trends underpinning business infrastructures and periodical publishing developments in these periods. It is once again an exhaustive offering of quantitative material that confirms what others have suggested qualitatively, namely that while an elite, educated, and professional cadre of individuals led magazine developments in the early period of the U.S. republic, by the mid-nineteenth century social standings, education and status of journal founders were more dispersed and egalitarian in nature. However, one point not clear is how reliable such generalisations can be about mid-nineteenth century journal founders when based on a random sample of 150 magazines from a total of 2,678 established during that period. Nevertheless, such points should not detract from appreciating the attention this richly layered study brings to understanding how nineteenth-century U.S. periodical culture operated within larger socio-economic and cultural circumstances.